

Pioneering German feminist declares 'easy times are over'

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Body

When Alice Schwarzer was starting out as a women's activist, she was at the side of people like Simone de Beauvoir, the French writer and feminist. The heady days of political struggle begun in 1968 led both women, and many contemporaries, to believe their many battles could be swiftly won.

Almost 50 years later, Schwarzer, Germany's best-known feminist, is still fighting, but time has not much changed the targets: white men, autocrats and anyone else who wants to decide for a woman what she does with her body, from abortion to shrouding herself in a burka.

"The easy times of post-feminism are over," Schwarzer, 74, now proclaims. "At the latest since Trump's election, it is feminism pure which is needed."

That battle cry sounded from the pages of EMMA, the feminist magazine Schwarzer started in 1977 on the proceeds of the most successful of her 25 books, *The Small Difference and Its Big Effects*, first published in 1975 and now translated into 12 languages.

EMMA celebrated its 40th birthday in January, with Schwarzer proudly noting that it is solvent and independent, financed by subscriptions and newsstand sales, with a bimonthly circulation of 50,000.

The current particular targets of Schwarzer's ire are U.S. President Donald Trump and Turkey's increasingly authoritarian ruler, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

"What is so shocking for all of us," Schwarzer said of Trump's election, "is that such an old-school sexist makes it to the top, and that so many women voted for him. That is backlash; that is reactionary."

In her vehement view, both he and Erdogan - "a lifelong proponent of God's state" - can be compared to the Nazis. And she is adamant that it is "so fatal that in our democracies we have failed to recognize Islamism as the fascism of the 21st century."

Passion and the feminist cause seem to have come naturally to Schwarzer, who was born in December 1942 in the Ruhr industrial town of Wuppertal. She was raised by youthful maternal grandparents after her mother gave birth at 22 and then largely vanished from her daughter's life.

Most unusually for those times, Schwarzer's grandmother, Margarete Schwarzer, known as Grete, who was 46 when Alice was born, "had a point of view" and was unafraid to say so.

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"She was very anti-Nazi," Schwarzer said, "which isolated anyone in the Nazi time. And not just then. You must know that also after 1945 it was not fashionable to be anti-Nazi and that - as my grandmother could attest - the Nazis all still sat at their posts, in city hall, everywhere."

Her grandmother was also "a visionary," Schwarzer said. "She was an eco-activist already in the 1950s and campaigned for animal rights."

By contrast, Schwarzer said, "my grandfather changed diapers" and "was a very sensitive, fun, dear person."

Growing up as one of a trio with equal rights, "I thought women may think and men also have something maternal," she said. "Then I went out into the world and it was different. Perhaps that's also what enrages me."

Evacuated to Bavaria during the Second World War, Schwarzer returned to Wuppertal in 1950, finished school at 16 and became an office worker. Soon, she went to France, learning French and doing odd jobs until getting a journalist traineeship in 1966 in Dusseldorf. After a stint at a German satirical magazine, she returned to Paris and joined the Movement for the Liberation of Women in 1970.

That was where she met Beauvoir, as well as Jean-Paul Sartre, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and other luminaries of France's left-wing political scene. In April 1971, Schwarzer joined Beauvoir, actress Catherine Deneuve and 340 other women in admitting publicly that they had had what were then illegal abortions.

By June of that year, Schwarzer had exported the idea to Germany, where 374 women, including herself and popular actresses such as Romy Schneider, published a similar admission in their ultimately successful campaign to legalize abortion.

Schwarzer still splits time between Cologne in western Germany and Paris. France "is really a way of living that I otherwise miss," she said.

It also perhaps feeds a lifelong sense of being an outsider. Schwarzer never married, has written about one long-ago 10-year relationship with a Frenchman and has been variously associated with male and female partners.

When Angela Merkel was sworn in as Germany's first female chancellor in 2005, Schwarzer said, "I almost wept." She recalled saying that day: "Yes, now little girls in Germany know they can become a hairdresser, or chancellor. Let's see."

But as she recalled how the abortion-rights stance helped start the women's movement in France and Germany, anger overcame her.

"I have been speaking out now for almost 50 years, and it just can't be," she shouted, banging the table twice for emphasis, "that we have to defend it again in Germany and Poland," where there are mounting anti-abortion campaigns.

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